

Behavioral Health Advisory

DHS Office of Health Affairs



August 31, 2017

TO: DHS Component Behavioral Health Contacts

SUBJECT: Behavioral Health Reactions and Support Resources following Hurricane and Flood Disasters

Background

The impact of Hurricane Harvey has resulted in severe flooding in Texas and in parts of neighboring Louisiana. Response teams, volunteers, and citizens impacted by the hurricane and recent flooding react in different ways to disaster situations. Following a disaster, people find themselves thinking about the event and some may have strong emotional reactions. Understanding common stress reactions to distressing events can help individuals cope with their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.

Common Responses to Disaster

It is not uncommon for individuals affected by a disaster to experience some signs or symptoms of trauma-related stress following a natural disaster. Individuals affected by a disaster may experience any of the following responses:

- Intense Emotions: grief, shock, anxiety, irritability, anger, sadness, helplessness, overwhelmed
- Difficulty Controlling Thoughts: concentration problems, indecisiveness, and vivid memories of the event
- Physical Effects: fatigue, headaches, chest pain, nausea
- Changes in Behavior: impaired sleep, disrupted eating patterns
- Strained Relationships: increased disagreements or conflict with family members, friends, and coworkers
- Sensitivity to Environment: loud noises, sirens, or other sensations may trigger memories of the disaster

Recovery Recommendations and Resources

If you need help, ask for help.

Ask if the employee is ok.

Limit repeated media viewing of hurricane coverage and aftermath.

Comprehensive information about recovering emotionally from disaster can be found on the American Psychological Association (APA) website at <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/recovering-disasters.aspx>.

This Safety and Health Information Bulletin is not a standard or regulation, and it creates no new legal obligations. The Bulletin is advisory in nature, for internal DHS use only; informational in content, and is intended to assist supervisors and employees in providing a safe and healthful workplace. For more information about Office of Health Affairs Health Advisories, contact the OHA Watch Desk at NOC.OHA@hq.dhs.gov or 202-282-9262.

This information is intended to help employers and workers take steps to build emotional well-being and gain a sense of control following a disaster event.

Consult with your internal behavioral health and wellness program personnel/assets for component-specific protective resources (e.g., peer or chaplaincy support programs).

Disaster Behavioral Health Resources

Disaster Responders - Behavioral Health Support

This website provides resources on self-care for disaster responders, and specific disaster-related behavioral health interventions that responders can use to help survivors recover from a disaster.

http://archive.samhsa.gov/dtac/dbhis/dbhis_responders_intro.asp

Disaster Response App

Mobile application (app) helps EMS health responders provide quality support to survivors through the resource locator and hotline. Self-care support for responders is also available on this tool.

<https://www.store.samhsa.gov/apps/disaster/>

Disaster Distress Helpline - 1-800-985-5990 and SMS (Text “TalkWithUs” to 66746)

Toll-free helpline operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week and offers free, confidential, and multilingual crisis support service to U.S. citizens who are experiencing psychological distress as a result of natural or human-caused disasters.

Disaster Response Support Resource for Families with Children

Educational material for common reactions of children (preschool and early childhood to adolescence) who experience a disaster and traumatic event. Recommendations for responding in helpful, supportive ways and when to seek additional support. <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Tips-for-Talking-With-and-Helping-Children-and-Youth-Cope-After-a-Disaster-or-Traumatic-Event-A-Guide-for-Parents-Caregivers-and-Teachers/SMA12-4732>

Employee Assistance Programs

Responding to disasters and related operational stress can negatively affect an employee’s ability to work and cope with occupational stressors. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) provide services designed to help employees, managers, and organizations meet life challenges and remain healthy, engaged, and productive. Short-term counseling and referral for issues that are having an impact on the employee’s ability to work are available through the EAP. The EAP counselor will either address your concerns during counseling sessions, or they will refer you on to appropriate community resources, counselors, and other supports. Each component has their own EAP. Component EAP point of contact list is available at

<http://dhsconnect.dhs.gov/org/comp/mgmt/dhshr/emp/Pages/EAP.aspx>

Component Assistance

Office of Health Affairs Behavioral Health subject matter experts are available to assist Component’s in developing and evaluating deployment policies as needed.

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